**Investments 14.2**

Returning after the negotiations, having taken Taylor with me while Quinn returned in his own way, we gathered in the meeting room. “Well, I think that went well! What?” I asked at my Lawyer’s shaking head.

“It could’ve been worse,” he agreed, which wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement. “I was surprised by how quickly it went tho-”

“*Quickly?*” Taylor asked. “That took *hours!* Even Da-” she stopped herself. “Even some of the people I’ve known who negotiate contracts don’t take that long.”

Overwatch looked at her for a moment, before visible deciding not to ask what he was thinking about, instead commenting, “Then they were either very good, or very bad, at their job. If they do so professionally, I’d assume it was the former. As I was saying, it went surprisingly smoothly, though suggesting that you can deliver rare materials that are impossible to gather was not the best note to end on.”

“But, they aren’t impossible,” I argued. “Not *easy*, but doable in an evening or two.” Now both of them were staring at me. “No, really. Okay, Lava from the core. I shift to insubstanciability,” I stated, doing so and waving a hand through the table, keeping myself ‘seated’ with flight, “and just go down with a container. Honestly, the container’s gonna be the worst bit, though I think they’d sell us one just to see what we’d do with it. I’m immune to heat, and as long as I stay near the mantle the pressure shouldn’t be *that* much of an issue, and, worst case scenario, I lose the container.”

I moved onto the second item. “Sand from an eternal desert is just getting Theo to whip up some kind of highly limited ‘time gun’ and shooting it, possibly while one of my suns shines down on it. Honestly, I don’t see why that one hasn’t been done already.”

“Time gun?” Taylor echoed, incredulously.

I shrugged, “I don’t know what the actual name would be, I’m not a Tinker. Anyways, third’s gonna take a bit of doing, but with the proper powers, which I have, it should be doable. Gonna be a lot of math though. It won’t *literally* be rocket science, but it’ll probably be astrophysics, so *that’s* gonna be a pain. Hmm, and I don’t even have a definitive measurement for the initial V, as I haven’t measured it yet, and actually pinning it all down’s gonna be a cast iron *bitch.* Unless I ballpark it, and use multiples, though I’ll have to make the device reusable, so maybe-”

*“Lee*,” Taylor interrupted, breaking me out of my thoughts. “What are you talking about? And you heard them, it isn’t getting there that’s the problem, it’s the *Simurgh.*”

“Hmm?” I asked, “Sorry, right, I’ll work that out later. As for Ziz, she *literally* can’t see me.” From both their blank stares, I realized I hadn’t explained this, which was a running theme. “Okay The way the Endbringers see the world is *weird,* Alien even. They don’t detect things through light and sound like we do, they have specialized senses based on their powers. Behemoth doesn’t see people, he sees *energy.* Electrical, thermal, radioactive, maybe even Kinetic. Leviathan doesn’t see people he sees *fluids.* He knows you’re there because of the water inside you, and paints everywhere he goes with a giant sensor net.”

“His storms,” Taylor breathed in realization.

I smiled, glad she figured it out so quickly. “And the Simurgh, well, she’s a bit weird. She doesn’t have sight at all, what she *does* have is a pretty hefty set of Post and Pre-cognition powers. The present is invisible to her, but she sees what happened in the past, and what might happen in the future, which for most things is actually better. Now, the level of detail she has, I have no idea, but it’s got to be limited in some respects or else she’d know everything all the time and would never lose. It might be distance based, but it also might be consequence based, so a number of small events that lead up to a big event might catch her off guard, but single defining moments are lit up like bonfires. . .” I trailed off, realizing something.

Quinn was silent, watching me without remark, but Taylor was right there with me. Looking her in the eye, I could see the wheels turning as she started to make the same realization. “Do you think?” she asked

I nodded in agreement, “That *would* explain why she-“

“If she would try to hide-“ she added, fleshing it out.

“It’d be obvious to *her,”* I acknowledged.

Taylor frowned, “But why hasn’t anyone?”

“Did *you* know that’s how she perceived things?” I asked rhetorically. “You wouldn’t’ve found it out for years normally.”

The teen considered that, and nodded, before stopping and asking, “But wouldn’t *they. . .*”

“As far as I know, they think it’s an endemic trait for all of them,” I shrugged.

Taylor looked at me incredulously, “There’s been *three.*”

“And thus mistakes were made due to small sample size,” I agreed, and we both fell silent figuring this out.

“Would you care to explain what you’re talking about?” Quinn finally asked, smiling.

Taylor glanced at me, but I made a ‘go-ahead’ gesture, so she took a breath and explained. “If the Simurgh sees the way Lee says, not that I’m saying you’re wrong,” she quickly added, and I rolled my eyes at her worry, waving it off. “If she sees that way, then it explains why she does things the way she does. Not the big attacks, but how she turns people into bombs. Big things, like the attacks themselves, are obvious, but her attacks aren’t the problem, not really, it’s the people she brainwashes. They don’t all go and do one big thing, they spread out and do a hundred little things, each one making everything worse. Her attack, the big attack, she’d see coming a mile away. A month away. Whatever. She’d see it coming. But all her little things? The people she makes go crazy? *She’d* have a hard time seeing them!”

I sat back, glad we’d come to the same conclusion and happily watching her animatedly explaining what we figured out to Quinn, who was nodding in understanding. She wasn’t the same near-suicidal girl that Herb and I had found in that alley, and while things might’ve been rocky with Panacea, Lady Bug and I got along *very* well. While part of me didn’t want to wait, wanted to say ‘fuck it’ and go for it, that wouldn’t be fair to her, and I didn’t want to taint whatever would come next by starting it with me going against my own morals.

“So, by her understanding of things, she’s being stealthy, tactical even,” Quinn replied. “I’m sure you both understand why that’s *not* a good thing. It suggests that she’s hiding her actions from someone. It may just be standard caution, a procedure done even if there is no need. However, considering humanity hasn’t even been able to see her larger actions it raises a worrying question. Who is she hiding her actions from?”

That. . . made a lot of sense actually. Even if she was following the orders given to her, by Eden, Eidolon, or Scion himself, she still obviously had a will of her own. If that was true, and her actions weren’t just paranoia or SOP, but to hide her actions from *the Warrior*, then it made *perfect sense.*

Taylor paled, looking worried, and Quinn’s voice spoke up in my ear, “*And you obviously know what that is. We’ll talk later.*” I gave him a minute nod, kicking myself for not schooling my features, but I was home and among those I could trust so I hadn’t thought to. It was something I needed to tell everyone anyways, so it wasn’t that big a deal.

Still, it was something hadn’t to let slip, and I’d need to work on that when others started to arrive. Telling the PD about Scion was one thing. Telling thousands of rando’s was something else entirely. While my presence kept Clairvoyant’s eye at bay, the more people around, the more that might be diluted, actions happening that were at far enough at a remove from myself that they’d become readable.

“So, yeah. It all makes sense,” Taylor agreed a little lamely, turning back to me. “But you said you’d be able to get by her, but how. . . you’re a Blindspot to the *Simurgh?*”

“Guilty as charged,” I smiled. “Leviathan was the *worst* of the three to show up. Break can make Behemoth his bitch, but Ziz? I wasn’t lying when I said she’d never *see* me coming.”

Quinn left to go handle the ‘other forty-six tasks I have to get through today’, warning me that Toybox had already sent their first requisition, and that I was needed to deliver it in a week, though part of the delay was he had to *purchase* the warehouse to begin with, and the other part was how he’d agreed to have a week’s expected turnaround from order to deliver.

After a quick, early lunch, Taylor helped me clean the dishes before asking, “What’s next?” in a manner that brought to mind an excited puppy. The girl was downright adorable at times, and her enthusiasm could be infectious. However, what I had next wasn’t something she’d like, even if I let her near it, which I was loathe to do.

“Zilla,” I asked instead. “When is Panacea getting back?”

The VI did whatever it did, reporting back, “Panacea is currently in her quarters.”

“And has she had anything to eat today?” I inquired, trying to determine if she was just hiding or if this was a complete depressing funk.

“She has not visited any cafeteria, nor has anyone brought food to her quarters,” was the computers reply. Not a no, but making generalized statements based on little evidence was more of a human thing anyways.

I nodded to the computer, which was a little silly, and pulled out a pan. “Taylor, grab me a two eggs, the peppers, the onions, and the salsa.”

She did so, though slowly, finally asking, “So, what happened? You just said something happened, and it went badly.”

Grimacing, I tried to figure out how to phrase it. As usual, I went the direct route. “Well, first of all, I’m fairly certain Amelia’s interested in me, like you were, so that was. . . interesting.”

“She told you?” Taylor asked quickly. “I mean, interesting how?” she added, trying to be nonchalant and failing utterly. *Right, even if we’re not going to do anything, she still* ***is*** *interested.*

“Not as much, but I finally asked her about it when it became obvious and I received most of a confirmation. She’s not nearly as honest about this as you are, Taylor,” I informed her, the girl blushing under her mask. *How is that blush-worthy?* I wondered, but ignored it. “So, we had the same discussion that we had two weeks ago, though, again, not as smoothly.”

“Then,” I sighed, taking a second to actually sense the area around me before disclosing secrets in a semi-public place, “Victoria and Dean found out I was a power copier, Victoria got angry and lost control of her Master power, again, I nearly was mind controlled into killing her, *again,* so Dean knocked her out. She was woken up when I was no longer in Mastering range and she got it under control, and Amelia was being unreasonable so I applied the standard she was trying to hold me to against her. That meant I outed that her power was biological control, not healing, to Victoria and Dean and things got kinda messy, but now she doesn’t think her sister is going to think she’s a monster about a power she’s never abused *at all* and Vicky hopefully got a much needed lesson on why ‘I can’t control it’ is *not* an excuse when *yes, you can.* So. . . . yeah,” I shrugged, glancing over to see Taylor staring at me, pepper in hand. “It went badly.”

The girl next to me slowly sliced half the pepper, handing it to me to add to the sweating onions. “So they know. About your powers.” I nodded. “And you told her what you told me.” I nodded again. Taylor was quiet for a long moment. “She’s older than me.”

I glanced over at her, but she wasn’t looking at me at all. “And?” I asked, not seeing her point.

“You said if we were both single when I turned eighteen. But you said you told her the same thing. She’ll be eighteen first,” the heroine said quietly.

“And that’s almost two years from now. She might find someone else. You might find someone else. She might turn into someone that I’d rather not be involved with, and vice versa. I might become someone that *you* aren’t interested in, Taylor,” I told her.

She looked up at me, her stare intense from behind her domino mask. “What if I become someone you don’t like?”

I shrugged, “That’s possible. Knowing you, or at least with what I think I know about you, that’s likely not going to happen.”

“Because of what I was going to do,” she nodded. “But, but what if I don’t become that person?” she asked, continuing on before I could respond. “So much has happened, and you’ve, you’ve been there for so much of it. I was supposed to join the Undersiders, and they were *assholes.* Everything you know about me isn’t me, it’s a girl who doesn’t even exist, and I wonder if you look at me and just see *her*, and. . .” she trailed off, looking downwards, not finishing her statement.

She looked like she needed a hug, and I was half a mind to do so, but until this entire thing calmed down, in a way that I *thought* it already had, I needed a little bit of distance. I was a physical person, but a lot of people *weren’t*, and they took things very differently from what *I* meant them as, no matter what I tried to say. Instead I turned the heat to low, letting the vegetables fry, and stepped over to her.

A hand on her shoulder turned her around, and I left it there as she looked up at me. “People are people, themselves and no one other. Experiences can shape you but *what* they shape, that’s always the same. I don’t know how much is inborn and how much is learned, even if I tend to think it’s mostly the latter, but by the time you hit your teens and are figuring out who you are, the *base* of who you are, ironically, has already been formed. Nasty people might learn to blunt their edges, but they’ll still be nasty at heart. Good people might learn to be prickly to defend themselves, like Amelia has, or might have their character spoiled through undue praise, like Victoria has, but they can come back from it. Even if their lives turned out differently, and they turned out differently because of it, the core of who they are, *wherever* that comes from, would be the same.”

I looked the girl, only half a foot shorter than me, not even an adult yet but shouldering more responsibility than most, and smiled warmly at her. “You are you, and even if you go through different things, that’s not going to change that fact. You’re the girl who went toe-to-toe with the villain that fought an *Endbringer* to a standstill, even if only for a moment, because you wanted to save the lives of kids you’d never met. That’s the same person who’d stab Leviathan in the back to save a Shelter full of people from drowning, the same person who’d take over a section of the city to try to help those who couldn’t help themselves when the government abandoned them, the same person who’d sacrifice *everything* if it meant that you could stop the closest thing in this world to a *god* from killing *everyone.*”

She watched me, a fearful intensity in her wide eyes, and I gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. I hadn’t told her what lay in her future if we hadn’t been there it would’ve been *bad.* “Will you change, be different from that woman because you have different experiences?” I asked her, laughing slightly. “Of course! Hopefully you won’t be so scared, so *alone,* but the person who, when she could run, threw down with the *Slaughterhouse Nine* because no one else would is right in front of me. You’re not dumping more and more of your emotions into your swarm, sacrificing your humanity because there’s no one you can be vulnerable around, no one you truly trust to protect you if you have a moment of weakness. I don’t see that as a bad thing.”

“Don’t compare yourself to someone you’ve never met, who you *can’t* be, because you won’t have lived what she’s lived through,” I directed her. “Instead just be yourself, the person who cares for others, the person who’s brave enough to stand up and go ‘No, this isn’t right’ even if the safe thing is to just keep your head down. I know you’re not the best at looking out for yourself, but, if you haven’t noticed, neither am I. If we look out for each other though, we’ll probably be okay. Okay?”

She blinked bright eyes and I let go of her, taking a step back as she looked down and brushed her face with a sleeve. “Okay,” she said thickly. “But, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“About Amelia being older?” I asked, and she nodded. “Honestly, I have no idea. To be honest, I’m hoping she finds happiness with someone that’ll be able to be there for her more than I can. You too, to be honest.” She stilled, but I kept going. “I’m. . . I’m not normal Taylor. Never have been. I’m not good with *people.* No, that’s not right. I’m fairly decent at *manipulating* people I don’t care for but those that I do care for? I don’t manipulate them, don’t go after weaknesses and exploit their flaws. I treat them like *people* instead of pawns, like I’d like to be treated, but. . . that I’m not so good at.”

I turned away from her, going back to making the omelet for Amelia. “I say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing, and then it all just. . .*explodes*, and I never see it coming. Hell, that happened fucking *yesterday.* I try to be honest, as honest as I can be, I try to make sure communication is as clear as possible, but it *never* works, and I *always* end up hurting people. There’s nothing worse than being hurt by someone you lo-you care for, but no matter what I do, no matter how careful I try to be, I always miss *something.*”

Taking a deep, calming breath that only shuddered slightly, I moved on to the liquid mixture, moving with measured intent to keep the omelet from becoming scrambled eggs. I managed it most of the time, but that, too, I failed at more often than I liked. I always moved it too much, *did* too much, and it all fell apart. If only relationships were that easy, but unlike omelets if you left those alone they just drifted off, only maintained because *I* maintained it. I’d heard what it was like to have friends check in on you when you were down, there to help you when things went wrong. I’d tried my best to do it for others, but it was always a one-way street. I didn’t really mind, happy to help those I cared about, but I wondered-

I stiffened as Taylor stepped behind me, wondering what she was doing as she leaned forward, pushing her arms in front of me. Was I messing up the omelet? It wasn’t until the closed around my waist that I realized she was hugging me. That. . . was unexpected. I forced myself to relax, not sure what to say. Previous girlfriends only initiated physical contact when they wanted something, and I tried to think of what that could be. As far as I knew she didn’t need reassurance of something, anything *material* I was wealthy enough that she knew she could likely ask for it and I’d likely only ask for an explanation of why in return, and she’d done nothing wrong so she wasn’t trying to use physical affection to try to brush it over.

Did I ask her to stop? It was nice. I’d not had anyone initiate contact like this in. . . a while. Maybe this could count as friendly, not something romantic? Deciding that yes, I’d put this in the same category as me being there for her after the second Raid, despite nothing bad enough to warrant it happening lately, I relaxed a bit more and finished the omelet. After minute she let go, and I gave her a quiet “Thanks.” She didn’t say anything, but I felt better.

“So,” I said, after I made Amelia’s coffee, and considered what to do next. Part of me wanted to tell Taylor I’d take care of this alone. If it was just me, Taylor wouldn’t say or do anything to set Amelia off. But that part, the part that said I had to manage the people around me or else this all would fall apart, hadn’t been right. I’d tried to be honest, not doing more than trying to avoid the worst situations, but I’d nearly been forced to kill Victoria because of it. I could fight alone, not worrying about the others, but this *wasn’t* a fight, no matter what it felt like sometimes.

My instincts were screaming that this was a *bad idea,* but fuck my instincts, they helped me in the lab, and on the battlefield, but at home? If they’d been applicable there, I might’ve been upset that I’d ended up here for more reasons than having to fight Scion. My only friend had come with me, and even though he’d turned out not to have betrayed me like I’d thought he had, he still wasn’t someone I could trust fully.

“So?” Taylor echoed, as I’d stopped at the first word.

“So,” I repeated, “Once again, I need your help.”

“I’ll do it,” she told me without hesitation.

I looked at her, wondering what I’d done to have someone like her with me. I would’ve had to cajole Herb, bully my brother (even if it was friendly), and my other ‘friends’? 20% chance they’d help, even with an upfront bribe/payment of some sort. I really didn’t deserve her.

“Okay, I need you to talk to Amelia,” I told her, and Taylor’s enthusiasm dimmed. “Every time I do it, I mess something up. I don’t know what it is, but she’s not as easy to talk to you as you are. Can you handle that for me?”

She brightened a little at my question, nodding. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask,” I smiled. “You also have a lot in common. You’re both intelligent, both strong in character, both have been hurt, you through bullying and her through neglect, and you both have powers that, if their full extent were understood, would make people fear you. Her for her ability to create monsters, and you for being able to be a living plague of locusts right out of the Bible, only worse as your swarms aren’t mindless, but directed. Not that either of you would do that, but you’ve got to admit there’s a reason that, with one completely understandable exception, you’ve never gone that far.”

Taylor hesitated, “You, you haven’t told anyone else that I can do that, have you?”

I shook my head. “I’m not inclined to spill the secrets of those I trust. I only told Vicky and Dean about Amelia because I knew that Vicky would accept her and that both her and Dean can keep a secret if they need to.” *At least Victoria could accept it and keep it a secret when presented with it in the abstract. Having discovered that she’d already been violated with it would’ve negated the ‘we’re sisters, we don’t hurt each other’ idea she has and make Amelia an enemy*, I added mentally. “So, go talk to her, and while I’m not ordering you to be her friend or something, she does need one, just as you did.”

She nodded, “Okay. What’ll you be doing?”

Grimacing, I started to walk to the door. “Math. Lots, and lots, *and lots* of Math.”